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ABSTRACT

Community college technical communication programs have not resolved the problems resulting from their unique design features, including their close working relationship with local industry, the two-year duration of their programs, their open door admissions policies, and the newness of their programs. To resolve some of these problems, modifications need to be made in the areas of standards, recruitment, and faculty development. Such modifications may allow two-year programs to have a meaningful place in the future. (TJ)

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"Troubleshooting Technical Communication Programs In Community Colleges"

Let's put aside the problems and concerns of single, isolated technical communication courses, and instead focus on the problems experienced by multi-course programs in community colleges whose stated objective is to develop professional technical writers. The crux of the problems faced by community college technical communication programs is that most programs have not resolved the problematic consequences of their unique design features. Specifically, programs have not resolved the problems resulting from their:

- Close working relationship with local industry
- Two-year duration
- Open door admissions policy
- Newness

Based upon published literature, close analysis of two community colleges via interviews, and discussions with program directors from across the country, this paper's objective is to suggest ways of solving these problems by modifying current program policies and procedures.

In a period of rapid growth, difficulties and problems are often overlooked in the rush forward. In the 1970's, technical communication programs in community colleges experienced such a rapid growth period. From only three programs in 1972, the number of programs increased to six in 1976.(1) Today there are no less than

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four new programs on the drawing board. But during this same period, symptoms of grave problems began to appear: one program closed down, and another program managed to graduate only four students in three years. With the seventies coming to a close, so are the daily curriculum and administrative battles for sheer survival. Now is the time to turn from matters of survival to matters of future program planning and development.

The procedures I followed in arriving at the recommendations presented here were:

1. Review all available documentation related to community college technical writing programs. These documents included not only published journal articles, but such unpublished documents as the minutes and correspondence of the Rock Valley College Advisory Committee (1969-1977). A complete listing and description of this documentation is in Appendix A.

2. Interview pertinent personnel of two community college programs, Rock Valley College. In this process, I interviewed deans, chairpersons, and program directors as well as students and advisory board members.

3. Discuss my preliminary findings with various technical communication program staffs at a number of professional conferences.

Let's begin our analysis of technical communication programs in community colleges by reviewing their four design features.

Four Program Design Features

Designers of technical communication programs in community colleges point pridefully to four characteristic features which produce the very singular personalities of their programs. Some of these design features have been consciously cultivated, while others are simply facts of life in community colleges, or accidents of

history.

One important feature of these programs' design is their close working relationship with local industry. In fact some programs are designed to be training devices for local industry.(2) Program designers take great pride in this relationship because it ensures a responsiveness to marketplace trends and developments. Such a relationship also encourages local industry to provide programs with classroom materials, guest lecturers, and, most importantly, jobs for program graduates.

A second feature of these program's design is the two-year duration. This duration is true of all community college programs, but technical communication program designers take special pride in this feature. They take pride in this feature because it decreases the demands on students' time, thus increasing the ability of students to study in the program. Closely allied to this design feature of programs is a third feature, the open door admissions policy. Again this design feature is employed by most community college programs in their response to the egalitarian spirit of the community. And, as with the two-year duration, the open door admissions policy acts to increase the ability of students to take the technical communication coursework.

The fourth design feature of these programs that seems important is their newness. Few programs are more than six or seven years old. This feature is in many ways the source of the program staff's energy and zeal.

These features are integral parts of technical communication programs in community colleges. They are sources of the designers' pride, and equally, as we shall see, the sources of the programs' difficulties. Let's analyze the problematic consequences of these features on at a time.

Problematic Consequences

1. Close Working Relationship With Local Industry

This design feature has a number of problematic consequences, all of which tend to undermine a program's integrity and long-range educational goals.

One widespread method of maintaining close cooperation with local industry is the use of advisory committees. The powers of these committees vary widely from state to state: in Texas, the appointment of committees is just a courtesy to local businessmen and they have no real powers; in Illinois, all programs must have advisory committees, but the committees are quite limited in their powers; in Wisconsin, not only are the committees mandatory, but they also have mandatory approval powers over all budget spending in excess of one hundred dollars.

In addition to the explicit, legal weakening of a program's integrity, advisory boards engender a more subtle weakening action. They can overwhelm a program by situating it in the middle of marketplace controversies, or can make it overly dependent upon them to make the "right" decisions. The result is either total inaction by the program in the marketplace crossfire, or program collapse upon the withdrawal of the decision-making industry.

Another expression of the close working relationship is that many programs are designed as training devices for local industry. The problems created by this design are many.

First, four-year colleges frequently refuse to grant transfer credit to this sort of "vocational" educational. In refusing transfer credit, four-year college partisans on state boards of education tend to deny advanced or specialized technical communication courses to community colleges. These denials inhibit any real program growth and development. As a program director at William Rainy Harper College exclaimed, "I've been stymied by upper division people for two years in developing a program."(3)

Second, and more importantly, such pure "vocationalism" on the part of programs tends to undermine the true ideals of education. True education is a liberating experience which motivates students to transcend continually their limitations. Vocationalism doesn't challenge students to seek new goals. Rather it uncritically accepts the initial formulations of the student's career goals and simply makes the student more skillful or more technically competent. This horizon-limiting/skill-perfecting direction in community colleges results in an overabundance of entry-level trainees. These programs really fail to develop the future supervisory or managerial possibilities of the students; they, in fact, contribute to the dead-end quality of many entry-level technical communication positions. Professor Easom commented in this regard observing,

> One consequence of making technical writing courses exclusively job related is that only those communication responsibilities that the student will face on initial employment will be considered. (4)

Destruction of a program's integrity, denial by four-year college partisans of program development approval, and undermining

of the true ideals of education are all problems that can occur because technical communication programs in community colleges have a close working relationship with local industry.

2. Two-Year Duration

There are two special problems fostered by this design feature of community college technical communication programs. First, it is impossible to cover adequately both the technical material and the communications skills required of professional technical communicators in just two years when the students have no skills in either area; attempts to do this have even been described as "frivolous endeavors." (5) Four-year colleges find themselves hard pressed with double the time to achieve these goals. The result of these extreme time restrictions in community colleges is inadequate preparation in either technical or communication skills. As one student put it in one of the interviews, "I just felt lost (in the internship) with the technical content of my assignments." Frances Sullivan observed the same inadequate preparation in communication skills when she noted in her article:

> Unless he(the student) does attain a broader outlook and expertise in the communication process, such a writer's future in technical communications is limited.(6)

Since the community college graduate in technical communication has only a limited expertise, an ancillary problem is that graduating students are qualified for entry-level positions only. Whereas vocationalism consciously chose entry-level positions as their target; time limitations of the programs force this target upon graduates whether they want it or not. Long Beach recognized this fact by advertising that its graduates fill positions at the "subprofessional levels."(7) The consequences of inadequate preparation in dollars and cents for the graduates is clearly spelled out in this excerpt from a response to a community college's job market inquiries:

> The majority of technical writing or communication positions within industry require a college degree or its equivalent in education and experience. The two-year program graduate would therefore not necessarily qualify...unless the equivalent experience had been achieved...If they did not have the equivalent experience to supplement their education, they could expect a starting position rate of $3.00 to $3.50 per hour. (1969) (8)

These lackluster positions and exceedingly low salaries are small enticement for students and depressingly low objectives for professionally oriented education enterprises.

3. Open Door Admissions Policy

The problems which open door admissions policies have created in technical communication problems are shared by many community college curricula--the problem of diminishing standards and overwhelming, unmet remediation needs. Students are characteristically expected to satisfy their remediation needs in introductory and prerequisite courses. But the need is always greater than the opportunity to meet it, thus the remediation efforts creep ever higher up the curriculum scale. Eventually, the so-called advanced or specialized courses have the content of what were formerly the introductory courses.

What this specifically means in technical communication programs is that grammar instruction is substituted for audience analysis, paragraphing for graphic literacy, and spelling for report design. As Professor MacIntosh observed in this regard,

> I sense some tendency to treat the technical writing course as remediation for basics, as emphasis upon elimination of faults instead of prime attention to effective presentation.(9)

All too often there is nothing to insulate technical communication

programs from inadequately prepared students. There are few testing standards to certify graduates and those standards that do exist are not enforced.

The net impact of open door admissions policies on technical communication programs is that the quality of the graduates, and, therefore, the industrial openion of the programs diminishes year by year.

4. Newness

The problematic consequences of this feature of community college programs' design affect many areas: staff acceptance and support, curriculum maturity, and recruitment of students.

The staff of most technical communication programs in community colleges is composed primarily of "traditional composition teachers 'made over' with a new assignment."(10) The relatively short span of experience in their teaching field when coupled with the novelty of the field itself frequently causes their literature-centered, more traditional colleagues to look at them suspiciously. Professor White pointed out, "English departments tend to segregate technical writing and the instructors who indulge in that art, looking askance at their impurity."(11) This second-class status for technical communication instructors hinders their program support and their own professional advancement.

Closely intertwined with this overall lack of staff experience is the problem of curriculum immaturity. The curriculum of most technical communication programs is indeed quite immature and limited--usually having no more than three communication courses.

With neither the time nor the expertise available to develop advanced or specialized courses, the current result is the repetition of rudimentary lessons rather than a full range of communication skills experiences and courses.

Finally, there is the problem of student recruitment. Community college programs are all too frequently starved for students. This occurs because most programs are new and unknown. This problem is compounded by the fact that technical communication itself is an unknown entity to most students.

All too often, there is a strong tendency to equate new with good. But the ramifications of the newness of these programs: lack of staff expertise, immature curriculum development, and a lack of students put them in a difficult and weak institutional position.

Solutions

None of the program design features' problematic consequences is unsolvable or irremediable. But deep and lasting modifications are necessary, and it is critical that they be implemented now if the programs can be expected to survive and prosper in the 1980's.

Modifications should be made in three areas. These include standards, recruitment, and faculty development. All three demand the support and enthusiasm of the program staff to successfully maintain and enforce these modification in the face of future challenges. These modifications are not unimplementable ideals. Engineering education has experienced many of the problems described here, and program administrators and program designers are now in the midst of implementing many of the following suggestions.

Modification 1. Implement and enforce two kinds of standards: a comprehensive set of program goals, and student admission and graduation criteria.

These standards can only come from long and painstaking deliberation on the part of the program staff. They alone must establish the mission of the program and its goals; and they must establish these goals and mission prior to, and not as a result of demands from industry. Underlying the deliberations of the staff should be sound long-range educational goals, not the immediate concerns of the marketplace.

If community college programs adopt this modification, then a number of benefits can be reaped. With a renewed basis in long-range educational rather than expedient vocational goals, four-year colleges will find new ground for dialogue and cooperation with community college programs. The true ideals of education--to challenge students' perspectives on themselves and their goals--can be reinstilled in these programs. Advisory groups will return to the sphere of "advising" because the responsibility for the primary decisions will be reestablished within the staff of the programs. And, advice from outside groups will be handled more professionally because the program staff will have reference points from which to judge and analyze the given advice.

Admission and graduation criteria should build upon the program goals. Admission criteria can free these programs from remediation demands and allow them to pursue their more advanced goals. The graduation criteria can act as quality controls on graduates, thereby certifying to employers that a specific level of skill and achievement has been met by all graduating students.

In summary, modification #1 will:

- Provide new areas for cooperation with four-year colleges and universities.
- Give a program a sense of self-identity and purpose so it can act as an equal with outside industrial organizations.
- Give programs a reference point by which to judge advice from advisory committees.
- Insulate programs so that they are free to perform their primary function, that of developing professional technical communicator.
- Assure the quality of graduates' skills and achievements.

Modification 2. Increase student recruitment and redirect the focus of recruitment to technically experienced adult learners in a continuing education environment.

A lack of students can be resolved only by increasing program recruitment efforts. These efforts are best achieved through personal contact by the program staff. Colleges in support of these efforts must give staff more time and money with which to recruit students.

Continuing education with adult, experienced learners means programs should no longer try to give everything to everybody. The program staff should assume technical competence and be able to specialize in communications skills. If they do this, a number of benefits would result. First, two years in length for a program will no longer be a stumbling block. Preparation of the graduates can be adequate because it can be focused and relatively specialized; entry level positions will no longer be the only target for graduates; and four-year colleges will no longer find community colleges dup-

licating their efforts and thus finding themselves in competition directly with community colleges.

In redirecting the focus to technically experienced, adult learners, program designers will be realistically coming to terms with their own institutional limitations. Continuing education has always been on the books of most programs, but it has usually been relegated to a secondary effort. This modification asks that this type of student and this type of educational enterprise receive primary emphasis.

The continuing education environment and these new students will call for some program procedural adjustments: more flexible hours and locations; intermittent rather than sustained attendance, etc. But if community college technical communication programs are to find their niche in the future of education, they must be adaptable and flexible.

Modification 3. Foster faculty development.

Mature and full programs come only from a faculty that has the necessary knowledge and experience. When most faculty are new and just recently converted to technical communication teaching from a wide variety of backgrounds, programs are necessarily immature and the staff is inevitably relegated to a secondary faculty status. Faculty of these programs must be given the time, money, and encouragement to:

- Experiment with new course designs and offerings
- Conduct research in technical communication
- Attend special teaching technical communication seminars.

- Work in industry and observe professional communicators on the job. This can be done during summers or sabbaticals.

Institutions must encourage these things, and the faculty must have the professional integrity to pursue these activities if they are ever to lay claim creditably to teaching in this field.

In conclusion, community college technical communication programs are unique organizations with unique problems. If these programs are to have a meaningful place in the future, they must act to modify the problems which threaten to undermine their unique promise.

Endnotes

1. Extrapolations from figures supplied in:
   F. Sullivan & T. Pearsall. Academic Programs in Technical Communication. (STC, 1976) p. 7.

   Directory of Colleges and Universities (Council For Programs In Technical and Scientific Communication, 1979).

   F. Sullivan. "The Academic Training of Technical Writers... And What To Do About It." (TCC Proceeding 1974) p. 10.

2. "This is a vocational/technical curriculum, which functions as a training device for local industry." Rock Valley College's "Division of Communications, Associate of Applied Science Degree in Technical Writing, Purpose of the Technical Writing Curriculum". p.1.

3. J.F. White. "Technical Communications Administrative 'Basics' In Community Colleges." (ERIC Document No. ED120785.) p.3.

4. R. A. McGailliard & R. G. Fleming (eds) "How Do You Teach Technical Writing." (ERIC Document ED099844.) p. Easom - 2.

5. R. A. McGailliard. "The Function and Content of Technical Writing In The Two-Year College." Technical and Professional Communication (Ann Arbor, 1977.) p. 11.

6. F. Sullivan. p. 11. In a recent STC survey, only 24.3% of 883 professional technical communicators surveyed said that "an associates degree should be the minimum for entry-level technical communicators."

7. F. Sullivan. p. 10.

8. Unpublished letter from R.L. Carr, (Supervisor - Marketing Services Editorial Group, Sunstrand Co.)to F. H. Jackson, (Communications Department, Rock Valley College).

9. McGailliard & Fleming. p. MacIntosh-5

10. T.L. Warren, J.F. White & R. Briggs. "Technical Communications And The Community College." (Council For Programs In Technical And Scientific Communication, Proceedings 1975.) p.45.

11. McGailliard & Fleming. p. McGailliard-2.

APPENDIX A - ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication. Directory of Colleges and Universities. CPTSC,1979.

This directory list three community college programs and reviews their general program requirements and course descriptions.

Fear, D.E.
"Notes On Coping With Heterogeneous Community College Technical Writing Courses" The Teaching of Technical Writing. NCTE, Urbana Illinois, 1975. pp. 34-38.

This article is primarily directed at the new technical communication teacher in a community college. It reviews the ways in which these teachers can get curriculum ideas. It is especially useful for getting an idea of the randomness of these teachers' experiences and backgrounds.

Lake County Community College
Syllabi for their technical communication program.

McGailliard, R.A.
"The Function and Content of Technical Writing In The Two-Year College". Technical and Professional Communication. Professional Communication Press Inc., Ann Arbor, 1977. pp. 9 - 16.

This is a very precise discussion of community college programs: their personalities, their rationales, their unique aims, and their general course structure.

McGailliard, R.A. & Fleming, R. G. (eds)
"How Do You Teach Technical Writing - Proceedings of the Technical Writing Section, Nineth Annual Southeastern Regional Conference On English In The Two-Year College" ERIC Document No. ED099844.

This is an important collection of papers which deal with the practical aspects of technical writing. It has three parts: Part 1 discusses the relevance of technical writing and the demands of industry on the technical writer, Part 2 discusses various approaches to teaching technical writing, Part 3 is comprised of reactions of experts to the presentations in Part 1 and 2.

McWilliam, M.L. & Rush, P.D.
"Technical Communication At Kalamazoo Valley". Journal Of Technical Writing and Communication. April 1971 Vol. 1(2) pp. 147-154.

This paper discusses an interdisciplinary technical communications program: its objectives, a profile of its graduates, and coursework specifics. This article is useful for observing a successful program configuration.

Rock Valley College
"Rationale, Sylabus and Outline of the Technical Writing Program"

Minutes and correspondence of the advisory committee (1969 - 1977).

Sullivan, F. & Pearsall, T.E.
Academic Programs In Technical Communication. Society for Technical Communication, Washington, D.C. 1976.

This publication not only gives an encapsulized summary of technical communication programs, but it also analyzes these programs in many significant ways: age, students, types of degrees, and types of courses.

Sullivan, F.
"The Academic Training of Technical Writers ...And What To Do About It" ITCC Proceedings, 1974. pp. 9 - 13.

This article is based on the premise that education has not set standards for careers in technical writing. The author examines the evidence for this finding at various levels of technical communication education - secondary to graduate level. She also examines possible solutions for correcting this problem at each of the various levels.

Warren, T.L.& White, J. F. & Briggs, R.
"Technical Communication And The Community College" Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication Proceedings 1975. pp. 40 - 53.

This article is the transcript of a roundtable discussion between three community college program directors. Each speaker briefly describes his own program and then goes onto discuss various topics: faculty makeup, career education implications, recruiting, academic boundary disputes between two and four year colleges, graduates' jobs and coursework ideas.

White, J. F.
"Technical Communications Administrative "Basics" In Community Colleges" Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1976.
ERIC Document No. 120785.

This article reviews the William Rainey Harper College program and specifically its: objectives, faculty, students, development process, and relation to four-year colleges.